

10 February 2011

The Chair
Senate Community Affairs Committee
Inquiry into the Social and Economic Impacts of Rural Windfarms

The Potter Rural Community Research Network (PRCRN) is a recently established community based research group located in Victoria's western district, at RMIT University Hamilton. The PRCRN has a Reference Group of 25 thought leaders from across the region. Through an extensive process of consultation, the PRCRN has established a number of areas where further research is needed to inform decision making, policy and planning in a complex and rapidly changing rural context.

One of the key areas identified for further research is the impact of wind power generation in rural and regional Australia. It is clear that a number of unintended consequences have resulted from the recent expansion in this industry. The community thought leaders of the PRCRN, who represent a wide range of places and agencies, identify this as a major concern to the region.

While the intent of the wind farm policy has clearly been to increase the proportion of 'green' energy production, reduce CO₂ emissions and move away from non-renewable energy sources, PRCRN members, question whether these goals are in fact being achieved through the current policies and industry engagement. Further, they are particularly concerned about the impact of large scale windfarms on their landscape, on planning, and on the community consultation processes and the ways in which unresolved polarisation of views can contribute to a residual disquiet in rural neighbourhoods.

In Victoria at present there are 250 commercial scale wind turbines in operation. A further 1322 had been approved for construction as of November 2010 (<http://new.dpi.vic.gov.au/energy/projects-research-development/wind-projects>) including the Macarthur Wind Farm which, if constructed to plan, will be the largest wind farm in the southern hemisphere. This windfarm is more than the total of all existing commercial wind generators currently operating in Australia. A large proportion of the approved projects are proposed for the south west of Victoria. This is a significant development for the region. It would seem wise to understand clearly the social and economic impacts of developments of this scale.

Some of the many issues which require further investigation include:

- The allocation of decision-making between state and local government bodies in relation to wind energy projects
- Refinement of the consultation processes required in the planning of wind farms
- The impacts on local communities of the current approach to planning of wind farms

- The impacts of confidentiality clauses in land leasing agreements
- The emerging evidence of health implications of wind farms
- Impacts on land values of wind farms in a region
- The impacts of foreign ownership of land, absentee landlords and wind farm installations
- Impact on landscape as a visual and cultural asset
- Impacts on other industries of the introduction of wind farms, including areas such as manufacturing, construction, tourism, aviation and agriculture
- Impacts on the regional labour market
- Impacts on Gross Regional Domestic Product
- Impacts of any backup power generation facilities required to mitigate unpredictable power generation
- Implications of large scale energy storage technology developments
- Developments in wind energy generation technologies (and other forms of renewable energy production) and the likely future of the industry.

As a community based research organisation, the PRCRN proposes that a significant effort be focused upon resolving questions associated with these issues. It is clear that there is growing unrest on a global level in relation to the impacts of wind farms. This is evidenced by the increasing numbers of newspaper articles and academic studies being published in this area.

We are currently in negotiation with potential research partners, with a view to undertaking a program of research in this area as one of a suite of research projects aiming to inform discussion about complex rural issues.

Signed:

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